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AUTHOR	Turner, Dave
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ABSTRACT

For the last 15 years, a series of policy initiatives have advocated for development of employability skills by young and unemployed people in the United Kingdom. The call for these employability skills has been championed by these two distinct but related movements: the Key Skills Development Movement (KSDM) and the Enterprising Skills Development/Education Movement (ESD/EM). Action research and advocacy work regarding employability have been championed by organizations that have brokered and supported collaboration between business and education. They have allocated some of their own resources to this objective and acquired contracts with government to champion such related movements as education-industry links, enterprise education, and employability skills. A previous and now re-emerging alliance between the Departments of Trade and Industry and Education and Skills--now reinforced by the strong interest of Treasury--has made this possible. The future of employability skills in vocational education for young people and unemployed adults is bright because the integration of the wider key skills and a culture of enterprise are seen as equally relevant to employability and community regeneration by various key ministers and departments. (YLB)

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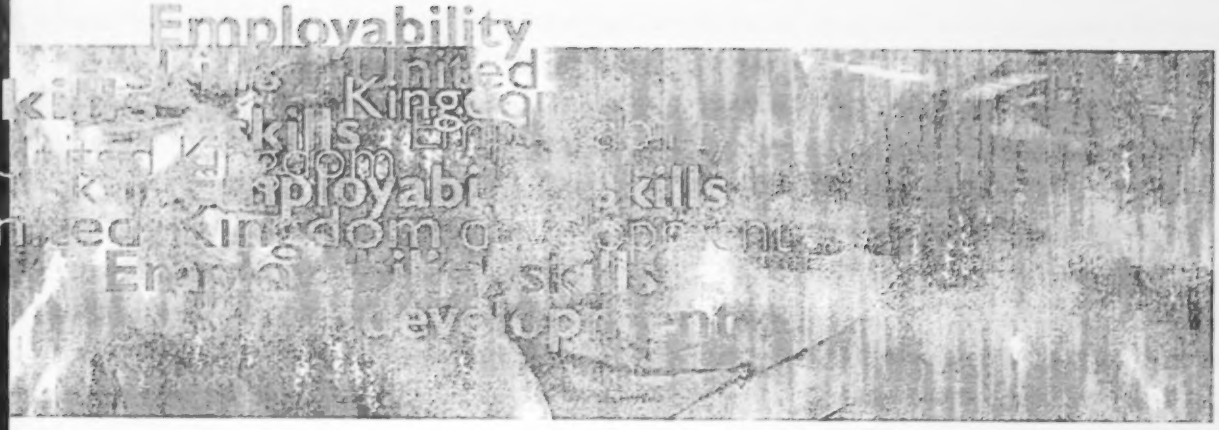

Employability skills development in the United Kingdom

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1 Introduction

The following report was commissioned by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and produced by Dave Turner. Dave is a consultant who has recently returned to Australia, having worked in the United Kingdom for 15 years on matters relating to education–industry links and enterprise education.

For the last 15 years there has been a series of policy initiatives that have advocated for the development of employability skills by young and unemployed people in the United Kingdom. These policy initiatives have sought to incorporate such skills into both academic and general education (secondary and tertiary) and vocational education and training. Although one cannot over-generalise, the call for these employability skills has been championed by two distinct but related movements:

- Key Skills Development Movement
- Enterprising Skills Development/Education Movement

2 Key Skills Development Movement

The call for the value and relevance of these skills has been heralded by both employer organisations and relevant government officers/civil servants in the Department for Education and Employment, now renamed the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Their collaboration led to the recent Secretary of State for Education and Employment (David Blunkett) introducing a 'Key Skills National Qualification' that focussed upon:

- effective communication—including written skills
- application of numbers—the ability to work with numbers
- the use of information technology

In addition to the promotion of these three skills, recent British Government policy papers, such as the lifelong learning green paper, have stated their enthusiasm for young people and adults to develop certain skills at school, in the workplace or in life that will help individuals to develop and maintain their employability. These skills are now defined as the 'wider key skills'. They are:

- working with others—how you work with others when planning and carrying out activities to get things done and achieve shared objectives
- improve own learning and performance—how you manage your own personal learning and career development
- problem solving—about recognising problems and doing something about them

Each key skill is described in a unit, which helps the learner to develop the skill, collect evidence and record achievements. These units are at five levels and there is progression in terms of:

- the degree of responsibility of the learner for using the skill
- more complex and demanding tasks, problems and situations

Whilst the first three key skills represent a qualification that requires the learner to produce a portfolio of evidence and undertake external assessment (tests), the wider key skills are not a nationally recognised qualification and only demand a portfolio of evidence from the learner which can include a report arising from a 'witnessed' verbal presentation—that is, at the conclusion of an individual or team exercise.

Government literature that describes the key skills values the relevance of these six skills to learning, careers and personal life, but there is always a strong emphasis

upon their relationship to employability. The DfES/Key Skills Support Program fact sheet states that *key skills are increasingly essential in work because employers want people who are:*

- *computer literate*
- *able to relate well to customers*
- *good team workers*
- *flexible in their job functions*
- *able to organise their work activities*
- *decision makers and problem solvers*
- *able to communicate effectively*

3 The Enterprising Skills Development/Education Movement

Once again, both employer organisations and civil servants from both DfES and DTI have worked together to promote the value of enterprise skills, education and learning. The two departments have now joined the Treasury in launching and supporting the Davies Inquiry (Howard Davies is a previous head of the Confederation of British Industry [CBI] and the Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of England) which will review the role of 'enterprise and business' in education in order to promote an enterprise culture.

> *It's term of reference will be to consider how to promote a better understanding of business, the economy and enterprise throughout the school and further education system. (Enterprise for all—the challenge for the next parliament—a statement by Treasury, and the Departments of Trade and Industry and Education and Skills)*

Although Treasury is expected to focus its attention upon economic matters, the other two departments are likely to take a broader view of enterprise which not only includes matters relating to entrepreneurship, but also explores the relevance of enterprise to transferable skills, social enterprise, community regeneration and enterprise learning. DTI and DfES are also keen to make the connection between enterprise and a productive workforce in the emerging knowledge-based economy—that is, relating enterprise to the issues of employability.

The DTI commissioned the Centre for Education and Industry (CEI: Warwick University) to undertake an independent research exercise into learning for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship. Their early research has identified a set of attributes, skills and behaviours that they see as essential to the development of an entrepreneurial workforce. The research is being overseen by a steering group of various partner organisations, including DfES, Treasury, Learning and Skills Council, Enterprise Insight, The Small Business Service and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. It is important to note that this steering group includes many key officers who are supporting the Davies Review. Enterprise Insight (a program/entity supported by the DTI Future and Innovation Unit) will offer a business/employer perspective.

The list of attributes, skills and behaviours identified by CEI is as follows.

The entrepreneurial workforce

Attributes

- self confident
- autonomous
- achievement orientated
- versatile
- dynamic
- resourceful

Skills

- problem solving
- creativity
- persuasiveness
- planning
- negotiating
- decision taking

Behaviours

- acting independently
- actively seeking to achieve goals
- flexibly responding to challenges
- coping with and enjoying uncertainty
- taking risky actions in uncertain environments
- persuading others
- commitment to make things happen
- opportunity seeking
- solving problems/conflicts creatively

There is little doubt about the connection between these qualities and employability, especially with reference to a knowledge-based economy that demands a pro-active and enterprising workforce.

4 A brief history of employer involvement and government partnership initiatives regarding employability (last 15 years)

Late 1980s to early 1990s

Warwick University (Centre for Education and Industry)

Warwick University Centre for Education and Industry (CEI) promoted and/or hosted a number of conferences and workshops that brought together key representatives from businesses (generally blue chip) and education. The workshops were held on an annual basis and enabled a relatively small number of key people to reflect upon practice and identify emerging issues and trends. It had a strong focus upon innovation and networking. Other key broker bodies such as Business in the Community were also present. At one of these workshops, Christopher Ball from the Royal Society of the Arts (RSA) raised the issue of employability and this concept was fully developed by a number of employer bodies (CBI and Industry in Education) and educators who were present at the conference.

Warwick University and Durham University Enterprise Education Programs

Programs which were funded by Trade and Industry, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and Department of Education (British Government) included:

- Mini Enterprise in Schools Project
- Durham University Business School: Enterprise Education Resource Packs
- Young Enterprise

These programs identified a set of enterprising skills that young people in secondary schools could develop by being involved in designing and managing a real project (generally a business–economic or trading project). Secondees from the private sector would help students form teams, develop and market a product and review their learning: companies (large and small) across the nation were committed (and still are in the case of Young Enterprise) to such programs. They supported such programs because:

- students were developing the kind of common sense skills employers wanted from employees
- the spirit or culture of enterprise was seen as integral to the future of the nation and its economic competitiveness

- secondees from business were working with teachers, forming relationships and communicating their needs and aspirations regarding recruitment, employability etc.
- secondees were developing their own skills of facilitation and supervision

Vocational education and training (16–18 years); Youth Training Scheme (YTS)

Funded by government (MSC) this national program of vocational education and training integrated a strand of enterprise education activity into its fabric. Young people were supported to develop their 'personal effectiveness' by being involved in personal development and enterprise education projects, whilst they were being trained in the workplace (companies acting as training providers) or at a further education college or in a community-based agency).

Trainers were offered facilitation training by such bodies as ENTRAIN, Young Enterprise and Durham University. Youth trainees were encouraged to lead real projects of value to the organisation/company in which they were training or to the wider community. This was all funded by MSC because employers and government believed that these skills would improve the productivity of young people at work, and in some cases assist a young person to become self-employed. The personal effectiveness and enterprise education strand of YTS was an investment by employers and government in both employability (more generally referred to as personal effectiveness in the 1980s and early 1990s) and entrepreneurship.

The EHE Initiative

Universities were encouraged by the Department of Employment to develop the competencies and aptitudes of tertiary students relevant to enterprise. The Enterprise in Higher Education EHE (1987–93) initiative funded universities (£1 000 000 over five years) to develop the entrepreneurship, personal effectiveness and transferable skills of tertiary students. Universities were encouraged to partner with business and community organisations and to develop programs which would better prepare students for their professional and working lives. Enterprise was viewed by government and universities as being about both entrepreneurship and employability.

Active learning models, the brokering of community and work-based project work and the professional development of lecturers/tutors as facilitators of learning were common features of EHE initiatives.

Mid-to-late 1990s

The continued work of such bodies as CEI (Warwick University) and Durham University Business School led to the publication of articles and newsletters that advocated for the further development and integration of employability skills in the secondary and even the tertiary curriculum (EHE). However, their efforts were supported by a range of bodies, events and publications, such as:

'Are the 3Rs enough?'—*Headway Magazine* (1998)

The Human Resources Director of Bass Breweries called for schools, colleges and universities to focus upon such skills as drive for results, courage and conviction, strategic thinking, impact and influencing, interpreting people, understanding organisations, curiosity and building capability—'Lifelong learning equals lifelong earning'.

'Towards employability'—Industry in Education 1998

This report presented the findings of research that went beyond narrow subject or job-related knowledge. The research explored the processes by which young people's attitudes, behaviour, group and organisational relationships are formed and how the content and management of education can effect the realisation of these qualities in the workplace.

Employers put high value on such qualities as initiative, determination, enthusiasm, the work ethic, reliability, self-discipline, confidence and consideration when dealing with people. The report advocated that schools, communities and employers should collaborate in order to promote the value of behavioural qualities for students and the need for spiritual and values education in schools that then makes a connection to personal, community and working issues for students. The report states that there is evidence that many youth action/community-learning projects benefit students by demonstrating the impact personal qualities rather than academic ability can have on the outside world.

'In search of employability'—Confederation of British Industry (CBI) publication (1998)

This publication defines employability as qualities and competencies required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby realise one's aspirations and potential. CBI viewed the skills as being about adding value to the business and highlighted the need for:

- basic literacy and numeracy skills
- the six key skills
- adaptability
- career management skills
- lifelong learning

CBI considered that employability could only be developed through a partnership of individual learners, employers, government, education and training providers and supporting bodies—for example, unions, trade associations and the voluntary sector. CBI saw the key responsibilities for employers and education and training providers regarding employability as:

- employers:
  - provide broader personal and career development
  - become a learning organisation
  - develop employee involvement
  - train and develop staff

- providers:
  - raise standards but also focus upon qualities and personal competencies
  - provide high quality and important careers education and advice for all
  - learning delivery to be flexible and considerations of equal opportunity to be fully explored

'Attributes of Youth Report' (Andersons Consultancy) 1998

This report analysed the nature of a 'passport to employment' for young people. This report lists a number of attributes that employers actively look for:

- enthusiasm
- initiative
- honesty
- commitment
- positive attitude
- adaptability
- flexibility
- willingness to work

Whilst 9% of employers saw qualifications as the most important attribute, more than 33% spontaneously mentioned communication and interpersonal skills as top priority.

DTI Futures and Innovation Unit

In 1997 the DTI Futures and Innovation Unit published the findings of extensive research that looked at best practice in firms across the United Kingdom with reference to the role of people in enhancing business performance. The report was titled 'Partnerships with people' and it came to the following conclusions:

- Employees need to be creative, network laterally, be good at teamwork and be lifelong learners who can use their initiative.
- Employers need to reduce layers of supervision, enable employees to take greater responsibility and improve flows of communication.

2000 and beyond

Demos

Recent work by the London-based think tank, Demos on the Creative Age has redefined employability, in the sense that they propose a blurring of boundaries between work and learning in a knowledge-based economy.

Learners and workers must draw on their entire spectrum of learning experiences and apply what they have learned in new and creative ways and different settings. Demos defines the key future skills as being about a clustering of skills/attributes—for example:

- information management—range of sources
- self-organisation—time, priorities

- inter-disciplinary—interface between different traditions, horizontal networking
- personal and interpersonal—communication
- reflection and evaluation—the reflective learner and interactive learning
- risk—managing risk, handling stress
- creativity—define own goals, problems, challenges, transfer learning, learn from mistakes, focus and not be diverted

Demos work supported by Reed Executive (Recruitment Agency) on enterprise learning

This work is documented in both an article of *The Times Education Supplement* quoting Alec Reed called 'We've got it all wrong' and in a Demos publication 'Enterprise learning'. Reed, whose recruitment business also runs many government-funded vocational training and employment programs such as New Deal, argues that the new age requires a new curriculum for schools and colleges. He highlights the need for enterprise, which he defines as:

- problem solving and communication skills
- think and act creatively
- taking the initiative
- confidence

The Demos publication 'Enterprise learning' (the proceeding development work was supported by Reed Executive) calls for a commitment to develop enterprising people, not just entrepreneurs. The key elements of enterprise learning are:

- The individual takes ownership over their work and learning; there is a substantial level of choice and decision making for learners.
- The learner experiences the process of designing, managing and reviewing a project.

- The learner develops the following skills:
  - interpersonal skills—communication, negotiations
  - decision-making skills—information handling
  - organisational skills—planning, deadlines
  - personal responsibility skills—rely upon oneself and rely on others
  - creativity skills—apply knowledge in new ways
  - evaluative skills—learn from failure, review

5 The emerging picture (2001 onwards)

The work of various employer organisations, government departments (Education, Training, Employment Trade/Industry and Treasury) and various university bodies and brokers between education and industry has kept the issue of 'employability skills' on the agenda for 15 years. As stated earlier there have been two separate yet related strands, (even traditions) of activity:

- key skills
- enterprise education/learning

Future development— key skills in vocational education

Employers, when surveyed by the Qualification and Curriculum Authority, indicate that they value the key skills in the following order:

- communication
- working with others
- problem solving
- improve our own learning
- application of numbers
- information technology

After communication skills, the next most popular key skills are 'three wider key skills' that are not yet (and nor are they likely to become) a qualification that requires an external assessment. Employers seem keen to develop the wider key skills on the job. They are popular with employers, as long as the learning is contextualised—that is, related to some real task or project that has some relevance to the workplace and wellbeing of the business. Some employers are keen to help trainees to either undertake a real project (such as quality circles) at work or engage in project activity at college, and to then map the development of their wider key skills against previous on-the-job or even community-based learning activity.

One of the major challenges facing the development of the wider key skills in vocational education and training is the unsatisfactory experience of both educators and employers regarding the assessment of the three basic key skills as they were developed into a national qualification. Testing procedures became too complicated

and there is real concern that assessment and not learning dominated. Key skills have also been seen as part of a bigger problem of a crammed and over-examined A Level. In mid-July, the new Secretary of State for Education and Skills scrapped key skills as being mandatory for all A Level students and removed financial inducements for colleges and schools to develop the three initial key skills.

Modern Apprenticeships

Modern Apprenticeships (MA) is the one form of vocational education and training that requires the trainee to undertake key skills if they are to receive their overall qualification. For example, a Modern Apprenticeship (Advanced Level) is expected to do a Level 3 NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) plus two of the basic key skills (Communication and Application of Numbers) at Level 2 or beyond and the wider key skills. This is because an MA is seen as an early career step that is broader than an NVQ. The transferability and generic nature of the six key skills is therefore highly valued—that is, to help avoid any concerns about the MA being a limiting vocational education experience.

Employers are keen to see MAs develop key skills through a real (contextualised) project. Some companies are keen to use this situation as a professional development exercise for their supervisor—that is, the supervisor learning to facilitate. This is particularly true of the blue chip and larger corporations which have a tradition of using project-based learning as a strategy of professional development. However, some smaller firms are less enthusiastic, expecting their apprentices to have already developed these valued skills at secondary school.

GNVQs & NVQs

The wider key skills and enterprise skills are not a requirement of either general or specific national vocational qualifications. Please note that both sets of vocational qualifications are presently under review and a new framework is to be announced later this year. Employers and government indicate that they remain keen to integrate the wider key skills into the learning experience of trainees. However, they will seek to do this through an activity that contextualises the skills—for example, project-based learning and/or mapping the wider key skills against normal 'on-the-job' responsibilities. There is a general feeling that employers and educators are not keen to see the wider key skills become examinable.

The DfES has just commissioned Learning for Work, a consortia of consultants to promote the wider key skills to vocational education providers. These consultants will:

- build upon past efforts by national training organisations to map or signpost opportunities for developing wider key skills within their normal NVQ modules
- spot contexts and options for project-based learning 'on the job'
- promote a culture of assessment for learning that seeks to regain the vision of active and experimental learning
- liase with the 'new economy' sectors which are particularly keen about the wider key skills—for example, IT design, media etc.

New Deal

Unemployed adults (18 plus) participate in a training and support program that incorporates assessment, careers counselling, skills training and placement. Many of the providers of the New Deal are particularly keen to develop the wider and basic key skills of the unemployed participants. Their role is to develop the employability of their participants. Many of these providers are community based and feel strongly about the contribution that community projects can make to both active and experimental learning and to the personal development of the individual. The idea of mapping the key skills against the work-based or community-based learning of a New Deal participant involved in a work placement or the Environment Task Force is both feasible and attractive to both the provider and learner. There is a clear context for developing these skills and relating them to employability.

Hurdles facing wider key skills

Although there is significant enthusiasm for the wider key skills in vocational education and training, one must recognise the significant hurdles facing their development. They include:

- the reaction to the complex testing arrangements of the three basic key skills national qualification—recently axed as mandatory for all academic students 16 plus
- the current uncertainty in schools and colleges about new post-16 exams—for example, the AS Level and A Level vocational qualification that replaced GNVQs and all the recent changes
- the proposed review of the Modern Apprenticeship scheme
- the high value placed upon the wider key skills by employers, but there is some hesitancy to place great store on a 'certificate' or even a portfolio of evidence as the proof of 'having these skills'. Employers value the skills and they want recruits and workers to articulate the skills and to then apply them to the goals of adding value to their workplace; that is, meeting the needs of customers, and improving productivity etc.

6 Future development—enterprise skills in vocational education

After a quiet period, the concept of enterprise education/learning is making a significant comeback in England and Wales. Although it has remained a strong strand of activity in Scotland, enterprise learning seemed to lose favour under the New Labour Government and both DTI and DfES (formerly DFEE) were 'cool' to the tradition. The recent re-emergence is particularly due to a growing interest in exploring the demands of a knowledge-based economy for firms and individuals and then making the connection between a culture and spirit of enterprise with the development of creativity, innovation and competitiveness. It is about redefining employability in a new economy by linking 'learning and working' and highlighting the value of such qualities as lateral thinking, horizontal networking, reflective learning, problem solving, self-management and multi-disciplinary teamwork.

Although enterprise skills are not presently specified and integrated into general or vocational education and training programs, this may change for the following reasons:

- Howard Davies Review—reporting to three powerful ministers (Treasury, Trade/Industry, Education) is likely to argue for a broad-based strategy of enterprise education that is about young people and trainers learning to be more enterprising, more creative and more proactive. This will be seen as an appropriate foundation to processes of entrepreneurial education for young and older adults.
- The work of the 'Social Exclusion Unit' and the focus upon social inclusion in the most disadvantaged communities has led to a plethora of community regeneration schemes being developed in these targeted areas. Nearly all these holistic strategies of development (which by logic incorporate programs of vocational preparation etc.) revolve around a 'partnership approach' that includes and therefore engages local residents. The social inclusion strategy is dependent upon residents of disadvantaged communities being enterprising and proactive. There is a policy/program awareness that the wider employability/personal skills need to be developed. That agenda will remain on the priorities of the three ministers who receive the Davies Review. Government agencies and programs such as New Deal, Connexions, MAs, NVQs etc. will also operate within the parameter of that partnership approach in these disadvantaged communities.

- Employers, both by instinct and as a result of considered research, value wider key skills. These skills, especially 'working with others' and 'problem solving' reflect the process of enterprise learning. Employers may not really want or need a formal assessment of employability skills. They want the skills in their current and future employees but they do not necessarily desire the rigorous, complex and perhaps undermining process of formal and external assessment. Enterprise is a label that can be placed upon a more flexible approach to learning which may not need to be constrained by formal accreditation.
- Vocational education for a knowledge-based economy should enable trainees to be creative and enterprising. Universities and further education colleges, as well as schools and vocational training providers, will be encouraged to:
  - promote and facilitate student-led project work that links various sectors of the economy—that is, projects supported by education, business and community
  - ensure that trainees can reflect upon experiences and capture the learning through peer and self-appraisal
  - use various forms of media and technology in their learning
  - increasingly learn and work globally

7 Conclusion

There is one set of six key skills that is used across academic/general and vocational education. They have emerged as the result of the work of employers and government committed to the agenda of employability over the last 15 years.

There is not one commonly used list of enterprise skills, for schools, colleges etc., although there is a great deal of agreement between employers and government about their nature and relevance to a participation in a knowledge-based economy. Key words include creativity, project management, independent/interdependent action, reflection, flexibility, networking (horizontal and vertical) and self-management.

Action research and advocacy work regarding employability has been championed by organisations which have brokered and then supported collaboration between business and education. These organisations, CEI (Warwick University), Durham Business School, Business in the Community, Industry in Education and even CBI, have been able to allocate some of their own resources to this objective. However, they have also acquired contracts with government to champion such related movements as education— industry links, enterprise education and employability skills. This has been made possible by a previous and now re-emerging alliance between Departments of Trade and Industry and Education and Skills—now reinforced by the strong interest of Treasury. This alliance has supported innovation as well as the 'drive for partnership' between various economic sectors and agencies; for purposes of international competitiveness, raising standards and social inclusion.

The future of employability skills in vocational education for young people and unemployed adults (New Deal) is bright because the integration of the wider key skills and a culture of enterprise are seen as equally relevant to employability (and competitiveness) and community regeneration (social inclusion) by various key ministers and departments.

The future for these skills will be even brighter if the United Kingdom does not 'go overboard' on rigorous assessment and external testing. A turn-around has already occurred on the insistence that the national 'key skills' qualification is a requirement of all A Level students (both academic and vocational).

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